REFRAMING: HOW STAFF HELP YOUTH OVERCOME EPISODES OF ANXIETY IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

Experiencing overwhelming anxiety is becoming more common for adolescents in the United States, and for the adults in their lives, it is difficult to know how to respond or help. Research suggests youth programs support social-emotional learning, including the development of emotion regulation skills (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). This study explores how adult program leaders respond to youth who are experiencing anxiety due to their work. A sample of twenty-seven leaders, all of whom had at least four years of experience working with youth, were interviewed. Leaders also represented a variety of program types (e.g. STEM, leadership, and art) for middle (11-14 years old) and high school youth (14-18 years old). Leaders were asked to explain how they respond to youth who have become too anxious to continue with their work. Qualitative methods and strategies, including open coding and constant comparison, were used to define the dominant response category and three strategies within this category. The category that resulted from multiple iterations of coding was reframing: to provide a way to view or understand using a new perspective (i.e., frame). The three strategies leaders used during youth's episodes of anxiety were: reframing youth's sense of ability, reframing youth's conceptualization of the task, and reframing youth's emotional experience. Findings provide a deep level of insight into how expert leaders use reframing to target specific aspects of youth's anxiety episodes and use multiple reframing strategies in concert.

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Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

Many adults have found themselves in a situation in which a young person they care about is facing a level of anxiety in a learning task that causes them to withdraw from the challenge and give up on a previously valued pursuit. It is likely that more adults are finding themselves in this difficult predicament. In a 2016, annual fall survey of first-year United States college students, 41% reported feeling "overwhelmed by all I had to do" during their senior year of high school (Eagan et al., 2017). This is an increase from 29% found in the same annual fall survey completed in 2010 (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Palucki Blake, & Tran, 2010), and from 17.5% in 1986 (Astin, Green, Korn, & Schalit, 1986). Anxiety continues to plague young adults as they move through college, with 61.9% of college students reporting "overwhelming anxiety" in 2015 according to the American College Health Association's annual survey (2017). Subthreshold anxiety and anxiety disorders have been tied to depression and suicidal behavior (Balázs et al., 2013; Beesdo, Knappe, & Pine, 2009). Recent research analyzing trends in suicidality and self-harm among youth ages five to seventeen found that in thirty-two US children's hospitals the annual percentage of hospital encounters labeled as suicide or self-harm had more than doubled from 2008 and 2015 (Hall et al., 2017). Moving from high school to college and the professional world comes with larger, more complex challenges that could generate anxiety and lead a person to disengage. To thrive, it is essential to be able to manage anxiety and bounce back from drops in motivation. The challenges youth face in their day-to-day work can lead them to feel overwhelmed, disengage and resist returning to the task at hand (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). At the same time, those overwhelming challenges can be valuable learning situations (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2003; Priest & Gass, 2005; Smith, McGovern, Larson, Hillaker, & Peck, 2016). For parents, teachers, community mentors, coaches, and other adult figures in young adults' lives, it is not easy to determine how to respond to a youth feeling anxious. What strategies can be used to respond to these anxiety-fueled motivation breakdown?

Youth programs are valuable contexts in which to answer this question. As of 2014, approximately one in four families in the US had a child registered in an afterschool program (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Programs also serve as rich environments offering opportunities for youth to develop disciplinary skills, like arts, STEM, or leadership skills, as well as learn social-emotional skills (e.g., teamwork, responsibility, self-motivation; Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Smith et al., 2016; Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). In high-quality programs, youth work on projects that are related to their interests. Projects are youth-driven and goal-oriented, and youth often confront complex and real-world challenges. Sometimes those challenges can be overwhelming, leading to experiencing anxiety and wanting to quit (Larson et al., 2016; Larson, McGovern, & Orson, in press).

Program leaders see their role as supporting the youth-driven process. In some cases, that means helping them get unstuck and back on track so they can be successful and learn (Larson et al., 2016). To the author's knowledge, there has been little research on how youth program leaders navigate situations in which youth are struggling with anxiety from the challenges they face in their program projects. The goal of this study is to deeply explore the strategies program leaders use to help youth manage episodes of anxiety resulting from their work. I asked how do these adult leaders facilitate youth re-engagement with their work when they have become too anxious to continue?

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Anxiety and Motivation Breakdowns

Anxiety is part of the everyday ups and downs in complex work. Anxiety occurs when attempts to reach a goal are frustrated (Gross, 2013). In flow theory, anxiety occurs when the level of perceived challenge is above a person's perceived level of skill (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). If anxiety becomes too high, the state of engagement can be disrupted.

In youth program projects, youth experience vexing problems and face repeated failures (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Many youth are novices in the program activity, and novices often struggle to break down the problems they face, leading them to be overwhelmed with information (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003). Novices also jump in with impulsive solutions that do not fully address the challenge, leaving them with more problems to solve. Studies on various subpopulations show that failure or the fear of failure can lead to anxiety (e.g. Pekrun, Elliot, & Maier, 2009; Stoeber, Schneider, Hussain, & Matthews, 2014) and self-doubt (e.g. Ames & Archer, 1988; Brunstein & Olbrich, 1985). Experiencing self-doubt or a lack of control can lead to mounting anxiety and a surge of overwhelming emotions like helplessness (Larson, McGovern, & Orson, in press; Seligman, 1975; Thompson & Schlehofer, 2008). A moderate degree of worry can be beneficial by motivating action and planning (Sweeny & Dooley, 2017). However, too much worry or anxiety can derail a young person in their work, causing a drop in the perception of skill or causing them to disengage or give up (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

Research points to several underlying mechanisms that explain how mounting emotions can disrupt motivation. For example, heightened anxiety can interrupt attention, affect the interpretation of the situation, and fuel avoidance behavior (Maloney, Sattizahn, & Beilock, 2014). Research suggests anxiety interrupts attention by using up critical resources for maintaining attention and performance, such as working memory (Beilock & DeCaro, 2007; Qin, Hermans, van Marle, Luo, & Fernández, 2009). Sometimes in youth programs, this cycle of setbacks and intensifying feelings of self-doubt and anxiety can disrupt motivation, and lead to thoughts of helplessness like "I can't do this" and "Why am I even here?" (Larson, McGovern, & Orson, in press). One example of how too much anxiety can cause a youth to disengage in youth programs is provided by Larson, McGovern, and Orson (in press). Amanda, a student in Emerson Drama Club, described a "breakdown" in her motivation resulting from "a buildup of a bunch of things. I had a fight with my father. I was having trouble with my knee. I couldn't get the dance. It was just kind of a modge podge of crap." She also doubted that she deserved the role she had been assigned to and felt a need to prove herself. This additional pressure added to compounding setbacks, leading to a level of emotion that drove her to hide "backstage while everyone else was on stage practicing." Amanda's emotional episode serves as a clear example of how anxiety can disrupt motivation and cause a youth to disengage. This swirl of self-doubt and anxiety amplified from facing setback after

setback led her to withdraw from her work rather than continuing to practice the dance out on stage with her peers.

While youth are often able to get themselves out of this cycle of negative feelings and thoughts, sometimes youth have trouble exiting this spiral of anxiety (Pomerantz & Shim, 2008). Moving out of this spiral requires emotion regulation skills that are still being developed and upgraded in the brain during adolescence (Riediger & Klipker, 2014; Sommerville, 2016). Some youth may learn to use negative coping strategies, such as rumination which can further amplify the negative effects of anxiety (Nolen-Hoeksema, Wisco, & Lyubomirsky, 2008). Other youth may not be able to name the emotion or say why they are feeling a certain emotion. In youth programs, an additional factor that could increase worrying and make bouncing back from setbacks particularly difficult is that youth are often highly motivated and invested in their work. Pomerantz and Shim (2008) discuss how high investment leads to overestimating competence, more worrying, and a harder fall after failure. Youth who have a fixed theory of intelligence may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing helplessness in response to failures and withdrawing out of fear of failure (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Dweck & Leggett, 1988a). In addition to being more likely to have thoughts of helplessness after setbacks, these youth could be less likely to persevere through the initial setbacks in their program work, initiating motivation breakdowns earlier in a project arc than for youth who have a growth-oriented, incremental theory of intelligence.

Anxiety can be distracting and disrupting. When anxiety intensifies and fuels helplessness, it can lead a person to withdraw from work. Factors including high investment, the state of the adolescent brain, and mindset combined with the open-ended and complex nature of youth program work can create a perfect storm for motivational breakdowns. When youth are stuck in a motivational breakdown, it can be beneficial for adults to provide some support as youth do not always have the ability to manage what can be, understandably, an overwhelming experience. During these breakdowns in programs, as with youth like Amanda, adult leaders can potentially step in to help youth exit the cycle of negative emotions and thoughts, re-engage, and turn their experience into a learning opportunity (Rusk et al., 2013).

Program Adult Leader's Role in Helping Adolescents Regulate Anxiety

Adult program leaders work in a context that prioritizes adapting responses to individual youth, developing personal relationships with youth (Smith et al., 2016), and earning a high level of trust (Griffith & Larson, 2016). This puts leaders in an ideal position to engage youth about sensitive topics like emotion. However, there has been little research on specific strategies program leaders use to support youth emotion regulation. In one exception, Rusk et al. (2013), describe a handful of strategies program leaders use for facilitating youth management of emotions in the moment. In a pilot study with youth and experienced leaders from four programs, they found that program leaders took part in coaching youth through emotional episodes. Emotion coaching is a set of strategies including validating the youth's

emotion, helping them name their emotions, and helping them problem solve (Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). Rusk et al. (2013) identified three leader-described emotion coaching strategies: building awareness of emotion and reflection on what caused them, suggesting strategies for managing emotion (especially anger and frustration), and encouraging problem solving. Parent emotion coaching is associated with reduced internalizing behaviors in adolescents (Stocker, Richmond, Rhoades, & Kiang, 2007). Research suggests emotion coaching can be effective in improving social-emotional skills (e.g. emotional understanding) in contexts outside of the family (e.g. in classrooms; Bierman et al., 2008), but there is a limited understanding of how to specifically enact emotion coaching strategies in youth programs in response to anxiety episodes.

Overview of Current Study

This study will utilize a larger sample of leaders from a greater number of programs and more refined questions to build on Rusk et al.'s (2013) findings. More research is needed to better understand what emotion coaching strategies look like and how leaders use them in real time with adolescents during episodes of anxiety. Analyzing expert leaders' descriptions of their responses when a youth disengages or gives up trying to achieve their goal of planting a garden, making a video, cooking a recipe, or designing a community event can give us further insight and detail into effective responses. This contextual level of understanding of facilitating strategies may help program leaders, and potentially other adults (e.g. teachers), be more successful in helping youth re-engage. This study sought to identify specific strategies experienced program leaders have used to help adolescents re-engage during episodes of anxiety. This study additionally explores how more specific strategies can be adapted under varying conditions or used in concert.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Sample: Leaders and Programs

The sample of leaders included in this study was from the Pathways Project, a larger, multi-method, longitudinal study. The goal of the larger study was to follow youth participants, leaders, and parents over one program cycle to learn about positive youth development in high-quality youth programs. The current study focuses on a subset of 27 leaders who discussed how they responded to youth who were anxious due to their work. The leaders are 52% European American, 19% African American, and 11% Latinx. Seventy-eight percent of the leader sample is female, and their median age is 29 (24-62 years old). These leaders also have many years of experience. All had at least four years working with youth (median is 12; maximum of 42 years). Seventeen of these leaders worked in programs for older youth (approximately 14-18 years old) and 10 in programs for younger youth (approximately 11-14 years old).

The programs these leaders work in are diverse in several ways. There are five types of programs: 13 leadership programs, four STEM programs, four arts programs, one gardening program, and five programs that combine STEM and another discipline. Eleven of the programs cater to older youth and nine to younger youth. Programs are located across two cities and one rural area in the Midwest. In these programs, youth participants are primarily Latino, African American, and European. Programs were initially selected based on program features associated with high quality, including leader experience, leaders prioritizing positive development and low drop-out rates.

Procedure

Leaders were recruited and provided information about the study including program benefits and safeguards. Leaders' participation was voluntary, and consent was obtained prior to the interview, according to procedures approved by UIUC's IRB. Leaders were interviewed four times across a program cycle – typically a school year. Interviewers were trained and experienced graduate students, staff, and faculty members. Interviewers were encouraged to ask for specific examples of leader interactions with youth. At the end of each interview, leaders were paid an honorarium of $30. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked by the interviewer.

The interviews were semi-structured, utilizing open-ended questions to elicit descriptions and accounts of leader practices and experiences. This study focused on responses to the question: "Describe a situation in which a youth's anxieties or worries about a project interfered with making progress. What did you do?" A majority of leaders were asked this revised, more direct version of the question. As part of the earlier interviews leaders were asked: "A youth is anxious or lacks the confidence to do what he/she needs to do. When this situation happens, what do you do, if anything?" This question was asked as part of the Time 4 interview.

The subset of 27 leaders was selected based on whether they answered this interview question. The original sample of 44 leaders were interviewed, but 17 leaders were removed. Leaders were excluded in two ways. First, after the initial round of open coding, I excluded leaders who said the youth in their program did not experience anxiety (n = 6), described a source of anxiety but not their response (n = 3), or did not answer the question (n = 1). Second, leaders were excluded if they only described ways they tried to prevent youth from experiencing anxiety; they did not provide an actual response to a youth's episode of anxiety (n = 7).

Analysis

Coding and analysis. The goal of the current study was to better understand how leaders supported youth during challenging, anxiety-inducing situations resulting from their projects. An iterative, inductive coding process began with open coding, leading to several initial codes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). I completed six rounds of independent coding and developed a hierarchy of codes. My initial codes were close to the data and were focused on what leaders described doing or communicating. I revised and checked these initial codes through additional rounds of coding. Following Glaser and Strauss' (1967) constant comparison method, I then organized the initial codes based on conceptual similarity, creating groups of codes across responses. I revised and checked these groups of codes through further rounds of coding. As I compared these groups, I then created overarching categories of leader responses to anxiety also based on conceptual similarity. Another round of coding was used to revise and check these categories. As I refined my codes at these three levels, I determined that the groups of codes represented leader strategies and initial codes represented response cases. Response cases are the unit of analysis. Across the subsample of 27 leaders, I identified 42 response cases, which were defined as any action or dialogue a leader engages in in reacting to anxious youth.

The most frequently coded response cases fit in one overarching category: reframing (n = 25 response cases), which will be described in the findings chapter. The other category was facilitating peer support (n = 17), but leader descriptions of this strategy were not very nuanced. We decided to focus on reframing because it had the greatest number of response cases and is an active leader strategy that can inform staff training. Revised groups of codes within the reframing category represented the specific strategies (sub-types) of reframing: reframing youth's sense of ability, conceptualization of the task, and emotional experience.

Some leaders gave multiple examples of one type of reframing strategy. If a leader described more than one example of their use of the same strategy, it was only counted once. For example, one leader gave four examples of using reframing youth's sense of ability. I only counted their use of this strategy once, and this is also accounted for in the number of response cases (n = 42). This was done to more accurately represent the variety of strategies used by these leaders.

A second coder was trained to independently code all the leader response data using the codebook. We met each week over three weeks to compare coding, establish consensus, and refine definitions for the high-level codes (Hill et al., 2005). I encouraged the second coder to provide their own perspectives, and I incorporated their coding and revised code definitions into the analysis. Results of the final analyses are presented.

Conditions and shortcomings of the data. In the findings, I start each section by describing one example in-depth, and then I present a set of examples that show variation. I choose to present the stronger examples for leaders' strategies. Stronger examples were determined based on whether leaders included how they used a strategy during a specific situation with youth. Several leaders suggested responses based in generic situations, and there was little probing about the responses leaders used or the conditions in which they were used. It is also prudent to acknowledge that the success of leaders' responses was not verified by youth. Some leaders acknowledged they were not sure if it helped; one leader reported their efforts had not shown any benefit as of then. Nevertheless, these are all experienced program leaders from high-quality programs, and there is much to learn from their expertise (Larson, Walker, Rusk, & Diaz, 2015).

Chapter Four: Findings

The largest overarching category (25 out of 42 response cases) was *reframing*. To reframe is to provide a way to view or understand using a new perspective (i.e., frame). A new frame could reinterpret, redefine, and incorporate information from a contrasting viewpoint. Leaders' new and alternative perspectives of youth's emotional episodes contextualized their experience in ways that challenged assumptions and drew attention to situational dimensions. The frames leaders suggested seemed novel for the anxious youth. Leaders described wanting to "share some of [my] thinking," or help youth consider their "way of thinking" and "look at things in that kind of perspective." When youth appeared to be experiencing or headed towards a motivation breakdown, leaders aimed to help youth re-engage with their work by proposing new frames for understanding the three facets of a youth's emotional episode: their sense of ability, conception of the challenging task, and experience of emotion. I found that the reframing of these three facets represent the three reframing strategies. Most leaders (19 out of 27) used at least one of these three reframing strategies, and together these strategies were used more often than any other strategy.

First Strategy: Reframing Youth's Sense of Ability

Reframing youth's sense of ability was the most commonly used reframing strategy. When leaders responded by reframing a youth's sense of ability (n = 13 response cases), they provided a new perspective on how youth could understand and evaluate their competency. This type of reframing was primarily aimed at boosting self-confidence and increasing youth's sense of skill.

In-depth example. Cathy Murphy, the program leader for the middle school Douglass Theatre program, described how she used reframing ability to respond to anxious youth. In one example, the troupe was preparing for their annual spring musical. That year, they were performing *Annie*. Katara, a new but talented sixth grade actor, was taking on the principal role. Cathy, who has fourteen years of experience working with youth, described Katara as "a phenomenal performer… She'd never done a show – she came out of nowhere with this beautiful voice." The show for the whole school was two weeks away, and Cathy was thinking everything was going well – "it was great, it was good." One day, Katara was not at rehearsal. Cathy found her in the bathroom with tears streaming down her face. "She was freaking out" and was unable to go out on stage. She told Cathy, "I'm not good enough. I can't do it. Why did you pick me?" Katara had been doing well for the last several weeks, but a wave of self-doubt had overtaken her. Her confidence appeared to have collapsed. Despite Cathy's evaluation that she had a high level of skill, Katara had come to believe her skills and abilities were inadequate for the role she had been given. Cathy sat down with Katara for twenty to thirty minutes, slowly "rebuilding" her sense of ability by citing examples of her previous successes in rehearsal and the reasons she was chosen for her role.

Katara appeared to have experienced a motivation breakdown, resulting in her disengagement and withdrawal. Cathy had faced similar collapses in self-ability – "It happens every year." She described using a similar reframing strategy to help youth overcome their anxiety and self-doubt.

> Cause in their head they got these ideas where they've torn themselves down, and you have to be very like explicit, like, "Here are these good things you've done and we-I put you in this role for these reasons." [Y]ou have to share some of [your] thinking.

To help youth like Katara re-engage with their work, Cathy introduced a frame that focused on grounded, positive appraisals of their competencies. She tried to get Katara to focus on what she has been able to do, seeming to help her create a mental space where she could feel more in confidence and control. Cathy aimed to restore positive "inner voices they've got in their head," and to counter negative, self-deprecating voices that were undermining youth's self-confidence.

Cathy reported that after their one-on-one talk, Katara was "no longer crying and feeling a little bit better," and that she had performed well in *Annie* and subsequent spring musicals with the program.

Additional examples. Leaders across different programs used reframing youth's sense of ability when they became too anxious. Bill Lyons had been a program leader with six years of experience at Unified Youth, which is a leadership program for culturally diverse youth. He described using an approach that reflected that of Cathy Murphy: "[I tell them] 'Look what you've done. [Y]ou can do this, just like we've done in the past,' and remind them that they've been able to achieve things that they never thought they could before." He described "feeding that thought process."

On the other hand, leaders like Chase Pembrook of Urban Farmers and Jade Goodman of Reel Makers, used a slightly different approach to reframing youth's sense of ability. Chase, who has four years of experience, described how Jonathan's confidence remained low as he was trying to trellis tomatoes and having difficulties. "It's not that [Jonathan] was sad about it – he just didn't believe he could do it." It seemed that Jonathan assumed that because he was struggling to do the knots correctly, he was simply not capable. Chase responded by reframing the process of developing one's ability and skill. "If [trellising tomatoes] doesn't go right, it's fine. [You] can keep doing it until [you] get it right." By sharing his perspective that sees failures as a stepping stone on the way to mastery rather than as evidence of ability, he tried to help build Jonathan's belief in himself and his ability to get the knots right. Chase's reframing reflected a growth mindset – a mindset that operates on the belief that mastery results from effort (Dweck & Leggett, 1988b). Jonathan's original mindset suggested a fixed mindset, which is based on the belief that struggle or failure means success is impossible. Chase's reframing aimed to help Jonathan reengage by seeing that his ability was not defined by failure but that he had indeed made progress and could increase his ability through repeated effort. Chase seemed to be helping Jonathan recognize his power over his progress.

Jade, who also had four years of experience, used a similar reframing approach to how she would step in if a youth became overly anxious. Ariel, who was new to film-making, became anxious enough to stop working on her video when she saw a more experienced youth's video. "Well, my video is not as good." In response, Jade told her,

> Well, you know that this person's been doing video for a long time. That doesn't mean you're not capable of doing it…It's about practicing your skills set and figuring all that stuff out. But that doesn't mean what you're doing is bad.

Like Chase, Jade's perspective projected a growth mindset-based understanding of how to increase ability. Experiencing what seems like failure was not a reason to give up or think there is not chance for success. Jade tried to help Ariel see she had actually learned something about making a good video, and through practice and failure, she could "figure out" how to make a better video. Jade seemed to be helping Ariel recognize she could stay in control even when she fails. Using this new frame, Jade aimed to help Ariel understand the potential in her ability and how to realize it so that she could re-engage with her video project.

Leaders' use of reframing of youth's sense of ability did not fit into a single mold. Sometimes they offered youth a frame that saw them as competent because it included information about their previous success. Other times, their suggested frames utilized a different understanding of mastery and failure. Notably, the variations on this common reframing strategy seemed to be focused on increasing youth's confidence in themselves, potentially promoting feelings of control in place of helplessness.

Second Strategy: Reframing Youth's Conception of the Task

Several leaders responded by using a reframing strategy that targeted youth's understanding of the challenging task they faced (n = 7 response cases): reframing youth's conception of the task. These leaders suggested new frames that supported a different understanding of how to think about and evaluate the task. This reframing redefined the task and highlighted situational, activity-based considerations of which youth had not previously been aware. This strategy seemed to help youth reinterpret the task so that it seemed less challenging and success seemed within reach.

In-depth example. Desiree Bustamante, a program leader for the graffiti arts program, Toltecat Muralists, provides one such example. Students in her program were starting to fill in their sections of the community mural they had designed. Alex, a 16-year-old student, was spray painting her section of the mural. In her section, she had incorporated an image of a man pushing an ice cream cart. As she tried to outline the eyes of the man with spray paint, she just could not get them the way she wanted, and the frustration began to build to the point that she was not making progress. Each time she tried to paint the eyes, the imprecise spray paint stroke did not match the finer detailed mediums she was familiar with, such as drawing. Desiree, the program leader with eight years of experience, described Alex's struggle.

"[S]he was having a hard time. She actually spent, I want to say, a whole two days just working on the eyes, and she was getting really distressed… She wanted to have the detail perfect." Desiree decided to intervene, suggesting a new frame for conceptualizing the task that was overwhelming her.

> I showed her, "This is spray-paint - it's not going to be perfect. Walk away from it, step back, look at it, take a picture of it and look at it on your… It's a little bit different – when you are this close to it you can see all the imperfections, but when you take that picture when it is displayed, it's perfect." … I let her know that that is the thing with spray-paint – you kind of have to be okay with imperfection… it's not all nice and pretty. So, as long as you learn how to control and manipulate the paint, you are fine.

Desiree was helping Alex contextualize the challenging task of spray-painting the eyes of her character into a graffiti expert's frame. Desiree's understanding of how to evaluate progress based on the realities of working with spray paint and reasonable goals for a novice graffiti artist was a new way of thinking about the task for Alex. Her expectations for how her graffiti should look needed to change. She needed to be comfortable with imperfection and focus on what she could control – learning to manipulate the paint. Only then would Alex be able to see a way to make progress with her work. By sharing her frame, Desiree tried to help Alex see that the challenging task of spray painting eyes was within reach, reducing the perceived level of challenge.

Additional examples. Similar to Desiree, Larry Peterson, a leader at the archery and riflery program, On Target, used a reframing strategy focused on taking a new, expert-informed perspective on the task. He saw that Ericka was too overwhelmed to move to the next step in the development of her archery skills – to compete at the State Shoot. Larry decided to talk with her about how she could change how she looked at the situation.

> "When you go to the State Shoot, look at it this way…I would [aim] a little lower than your 260 average, and go that route because you have different weather conditions, you have different backstops, you have different people around you, your comfort level's down a little bit."

Larry provided a frame based on a new narrative of the future situation, one grounded in realistic expectations based on experience. He directed Ericka's attention to more expert considerations that were unique to shooting sports. He named and confirmed what she could and could not control. At the same time, he assured her she could adjust her expectations of her performance accordingly. Within this new narrative, Ericka could define a goal and work within her comfort zone, making the challenge less overwhelming. Larry reported that with her considerations and expectations shifted from using his frame, Ericka was able to step up and compete successfully. Both Desiree and Larry reframed youth's tasks in terms of an expert in the activity by providing a frame that incorporated novel information into a new narrative that reduced the challenge they faced.

Program leaders like Juanita Estrada at Unified Youth, used a variation of this approach to reframing the task. Juanita, who has 27 years of experience, reframed the task flexibly, accounting for the more complex task. Nicolás and Celia were feeling anxious about not being able to handle the large and complicated International Event they were organizing for their community. "Oh my goodness, this is really big! We're really gonna have to get a lot of people to help us." She described her response:

> I let them know that we can always change courses and nothing is set in stone… [I]t's our group and we're the bosses and we decide. So, we have the power and control to say, "Okay, let's don't do that now." And… I think when they realize that they can have that choice to say, "This is too much," or "We want to go in a different direction" … [It] helps reduce the anxiety.

Like Desiree and Larry, Juanita's frame reset considerations and expectations. In contrast, her framing primarily focused on reframing the task in terms of what Nicolás and Celia could control, emphasizing the choice the youth had in what those considerations and expectations of the task should be. This fits more with the context of the specific challenging task: it was a group project with less structure in which there were many ways to succeed. For instance, there are fewer ways in which to be successful in an archery contest. Juanita's framing suggested a new understanding of the challenge of organizing the International Event, defining it in terms of what youth could control and potentially making it less overwhelming.

Reframing youth's conceptualization of a task focused on reinterpreting the task in a way that made success within reach. Sometimes it involved utilizing information that experts in the discipline had, bringing youth's attention to aspects of the situation that were outside of their more novice frames. Other times, leaders' frames opened up what the task could be. In both approaches, leaders' reframing of the task seemed to be aimed at helping youth reinterpret what was challenging so that they felt in control and could see new ways to make progress.

Third Strategy: Reframing Youth's Experience of Emotion

Leader's final reframing strategy focused on the youth's emotional experience (n = 5 response cases): reframing youth's experience of emotion. This type of framing strategy sought to support youth in processing their emotions. Leaders suggested a frame with a new understanding of emotion – emotion as generated from their situation and providing information for initiating problem-solving. Leaders appeared to help youth move past their anxiety and refocus on the source of their emotion. Uniquely, this reframing strategy was heavily youth-driven, with leaders asking guiding questions that aimed to help youth see their emotional experience in a new way.

In-depth example. Vivian Maxwell, a program leader for the STEM program Robotronics, described using this strategy. The 11-14-year-olds in the program were focusing on designing and building catapults. Mateo was working on constructing his structure when he suddenly seemed to become

anxious about his progress. Vivian, who has 5 years of experience working with youth, said she thought Mateo seemed "worried about what the other students would think about [his] structure, so he was kind of hiding it and not wanting to show anyone – or ask for help with it." He was so anxious about his catapult, he could not continue working on it. Vivian chose to pull him aside to have a one-on-one discussion, using a frame that aimed to help him understand his emotional experience differently. "I sat down with [Mateo] and talked about why he was feeling that way – and just kind of helped to show him different steps and give an example of how to complete the project." In asking him why he is feeling anxious, Vivian aimed to help him with processing and connecting his emotion to the situation. Once he was focused on the source of his emotion, he could feel more empowered to start problem-solving.

Vivian helped Mateo reframe the experience of his emotions by providing a new way to interpret his emotions, move past them, and re-engage with his work on his catapult. Anxiety can be overwhelming, but this frame provides an understanding of how emotions can indicate there is a problem to be solved. This likely gives youth more of a sense of control versus when their attention is gripped by anxiety. It appears that once Mateo could see how emotions can stem from a situation and shift his attention to the source, he could focus on finding a solution.

Additional examples. Pamela West, a program leader at Nutrition Rocks with 40 years of experience, and Rebecca Quinn, at Green Lead, with 12 years of experience, each said it was helpful to discuss an anxious youth's emotional experience. Pamela said, "When it happens I always talk to them – ask them why they feel that way." When responding to youth who are anxious and overwhelmed, these leaders, started by asking youth about their emotional experience in a way that seems to build youth's understanding of how their emotions are generated.

Like Vivian, Angela Bartel, a program leader at Project Connect with over 25 years of experience, provided frames for anxious youth's emotional experiences. She described her strategy to help youth process their emotion, helping youth link their anxiety to the source, and shifting to finding a solution for the cause of anxiety.

> Usually, if you again dig deep and say… "What part of this is bugging you? What part of this seems hard or what worries you about this?" And based on what the response is – …see if there is something can realistically be done… Sometimes just talking about things, they work out their own solutions.

As Angela suggests, having youth use the frame and talk through their emotions and their source seem to be helpful in processing and moving past their anxiety. Once youth like Mateo are no longer overwhelmed with the emotion and are focusing on the cause of their anxiety, they can start problem-solving. With this framing, as Angela says, youth can even lead problem-solving on their own. Being able

to move past their anxiety and focus on problem-solving potentially helped cultivate a sense of control compared to when youth were stuck in a motivational breakdown.

In reframing youth's experience of emotion, leaders provided a new interpretation of how to process and understand their anxiety. This frame operates on the understanding that emotions have sources, and anxiety can be managed if one focuses on dealing with the source. Experiencing anxiety can mean there is a problem to be solved. Developing an understanding of how situations can elicit emotions is a critical developmental task, as is learning how to manage emotions in those situations (Larson, 2011).

Using Multiple Frames: A Case-Study

While 13 of the 19 leaders who used reframing used only one reframing strategy, five leaders used two strategies and an additional leader used all three. Tyler Bates, a leader with five years of experience at the filmmaking program, Reel Makers, used all three reframing strategies. The third reframing strategy was found in separate section of the interview and was not included in the 42 response cases. However, Tyler discussed using a third strategy with the same situation with the same youth. It also provides valuable insight into how these different types of reframing can be used in concert with each other.

The youth at Reel Makers were making their own films. Allie, who was dedicated and highly-engaged, had one of her actors quit after she had already shot hours of footage. Tyler reported that since Allie could not complete her story, her motivation collapsed: "I just want to give up. I want to scrap the whole thing." Tyler responded by first reframing her emotional experience. He started by helping her focus on and process her emotional experience. "This is not the end of the world. This is serious, but you are physically okay, so let's work on the emotional place you are in." He then provided Allie way to identify the source of her anxiety and see her situation for what it was – a problem that could be solved. He said these dilemmas often happen in "creative work… There's a need for really active problem-solving skills because there are so many different variables that at times, it can feel like absolutely everything that could go wrong can go wrong." Tyler said he wanted to prioritize addressing her emotions: first, he wanted to help Allie "de-escalate emotionally… to get to a place where [she could] access those rational, more creative problem solving skills." Reframing her emotional experience was critical to helping her move past her emotion and see how she could start problem-solving.

After helping Allie reframe her emotional experience, he shifted to assisting Allie with reframing her sense of ability. He did this by modeling using a frame that saw her as competent. He described pointing to her previous successes: "I know you're capable of doing this. I don't just have blind faith. This is grounded in the work you've shown me." He provided a new frame that incorporates evidence of her competence to help her see that she is more able than she originally thought.

Tyler said Allie was then able to get back to work on her project, but when she came to the program the next day, she was no longer working on a full film. He asked her what was going on, and she had given up on making her film. She had settled for doing a short trailer. He responded by trying to help her reframe her conceptualization of the task, using his expert understanding of filmmaking to help her see how to use the footage she had for a full film.

> You can mold something out of this that is close to your original idea. It may not be the literal translation of the story you wrote onto the visual images on the screen. There's absolutely a way to work with what you have and create something in the spirit of that story.

He attempted to help her see a new way think about her film, in a way that made doing a full film seem less out of reach. A film does not have to be a direct translation. He was trying to "build a bridge" for her to see a way forward.

Tyler's use of all three strategies shows how he navigates and prioritizes different facets of Allie's emotional episode. His intentional use of reframing Allie's emotional experience first seemed important for helping Allie get to a place where she could use the other strategies. Youth may need to process their emotions and understand what they mean and where they come from before they are open to thinking about their ability or task in a new way. Additionally, Tyler's use of more frames revealed the complexity of Allie's emotional episode as it unfolds over time. His use of the first two reframing strategies for Allie's emotional experience and sense of ability was not enough; there was an additional facet of Allie's emotional experience that needed to be addressed – her conceptualization of her task. Through these different frames, Tyler seemed to be introducing more ways for Allie to regain control and manage the anxiety originating from her work. In the youth data also collected in the larger Pathways study, Allie happened to talk about the same emotional episode, so I was able to get her perspective on her experience. Allie reported that she had learned from her experience of working through her challenge: She said, it was "a good thing because the next time [it happens] I'll be able to control it, and I won't be too nervous." It could be that next time Allie faces a complex challenge, she will be able to use these frames to help her re-engage, as well as shift between them to find the most effective frame in the moment.

Potential Factors Influencing Leader Responses

Although the sample was small, I wanted to explore whether certain conditions influenced which strategies leaders used. I considered a number of factors: years of leader experience, age of the youth in the program, the type of program, and the leader-reported source of youth anxiety. Based on a visual inspection of the response patterns, almost none of these factors were tied leader strategies. Only one factor stood out – the age of youth. Four of the five leaders using the third strategy (reframing experience of emotion), worked with programs for middle school youth (11-14 years old). Only four of 13 leaders

using the first strategy (reframing ability) and one of seven leaders using the second (reframing task) were from programs for younger youth. It is possible that this pattern based on youth age reflects the age appropriateness of at least the third strategy. It may be that older adolescents are more skilled in emotion regulation (Steinberg, 2005) and need other frames during anxiety episodes. Although age is not associated with an increase in ability to think about their emotions (Wilson et al., 2011), this study suggests otherwise. However, this conclusion is limited due to the small number of leaders who used the third strategy and low number of situations in which the third strategy was used. Additional data needs to be collected.

Integration

The intentional strategies program leaders used targeted the person-situation interaction generating their youth's anxiety. All three strategies seemed to provide youth with a degree of increased sense of control over their situation. First, reframing the youth's sense of ability intended to help the youth to see themselves as more competent through recognizing their previous accomplishments or see their situation using a growth mindset. With an increased sense of control comes increased self-confidence (Thompson & Schlehofer, 2008). Second, reframing the youth's task aimed to help youth see what they thought was an overwhelming task was actually manageable. Some leaders using this strategy introduced expert frames that changed task-related expectations and brought youth's attention to the unique aspects of their work's discipline that were not initially visible to them as novices. In other cases, leaders provided frames that emphasized the malleability of program tasks and goals, as well as youth's power over their tasks. Both seemed to make youth's challenging situations appear more manageable and thus controllable. Third, helping youth to reframe their experience of emotion seemed to facilitate emotion processing and moving past overwhelming anxiety. With this strategy, leaders tried to help youth shift their focus from the overwhelming emotion to coming up with solutions to address the source of anxiety. Concentrating on thinking of solutions may help youth feel more in control than when they are overwhelmed by their anxiety. Through these three reframing strategies, program leaders framed youth's anxiety episodes in a way that emphasized youth's control to help them re-engage with their work and exit the motivation breakdown cycle.

Chapter Five: Discussion

A positive feedback cycle of increasing anxiety, self-doubt, and helplessness, can be a significant problem for youth. Youth experience a loss of control and helplessness and are unable to re-engage with their work on their own. One leader described a youth's breakdown: "She turns bright red, gets really nervous... just stare [you] back in the face… I'm knowing she's just so stressed out of her mind." The goal of this study was to identify how leaders help youth recover from anxiety in complex work. Working on complex, open-ended projects is naturally risky (Blumenfeld et al., 1991). Furthermore, as novices, youth do not always have a good sense of their own skill or the potential obstacles that lie ahead (Zimmerman & Campillo, 2003). It is normal for youth to experience challenges that incite anxiety. The current study's findings suggest three strategies program leaders use for helping adolescents overwhelmed with anxiety resulting from difficult tasks inherent to program projects and work. Leaders proposed frameworks that aimed to help youth reinterpret their experience of anxiety. These three reframing strategies focused on different facets of the youth's emotional episode: the youth's sense of ability, conceptualization of the task, and emotional experience. It is critical to note that leaders who step in with these strategies were not taking control of the situation away from the youth but were helping them use a frame – a tool – to help youth regain control and re-engage.

This study's findings about leaders' use of the third strategy (reframing youth's emotional experience) builds on previous research (Rusk et al., 2013). In both studies, leaders focus on helping youth understand the situational dynamics that cause emotion. This study offers greater insight into how leaders guide youth in the use of a frame to process their anxiety so they can begin problem solving.

Matching Challenge and Skill: Flow Theory

The major contribution of this study is to illuminate how the first two leader strategies (reframing youth's ability and reframing youth's task) address the youth situations that create emotional episodes. Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory helps us understand the conditions of these situations. He posits that high engagement in a task (i.e., flow) occurs when a person experiences their level of skills as closely matched to the challenges in the task. Anxiety is caused by a person being in a task situation where their perceived level of skills is lower than needed to meet the challenges. This situation could be caused by either a youth's misperception of their skills as lower than they are or a youth being overwhelmed by challenges that appear to be out of reach.

The first two strategies identified by this research appeared to be responding to these conditions. In the first leader strategy (reframing youth's ability), youth's breakdowns seemed to be caused by self-doubt and thoughts like "I'm not good enough." Their perceived skills had fallen. For example, Cathy said Katara had torn herself down with those thoughts, causing a collapse in her sense of confidence in

her abilities. Youth like Katara had previously demonstrated a higher level of skills, but suddenly, they perceived their skills as lower than the leader had seen them be.

In the second strategy (reframing youth's task), leaders seemed to be responding to situations in which the challenges youth faced were objectively difficult. Youth were often novices in the task, and there were complex realities that were not obvious, making overcoming those challenges appear out of reach. Nicolás and Celia were both overwhelmed by the task of having to put on the International Event for their community: "Oh my goodness, this is really big!" Their anxiety, Juanita said, was "a natural response" given the magnitude, complexity, and open-endedness of the task. They perceived the challenges as too great for their skills.

The two strategies appeared to be tailored to address these conditions and create a closer match between experienced skills and challenge. The first strategy, reframing youth's ability, was aimed at raising the youth's deflated perception of their skills to better match the level of their challenges. Leaders explained their assessment of the youth's ability based on evidence of previous demonstrations of competence. Additionally, leaders helped youth see failure as progress rather than an indication of low ability. Failure seemed to lead youth to depress their sense of ability. Being able to recognize the forward progress in failure seemed to help youth see themselves as more capable. These leader interventions, as demonstrated by Cathy, helped build a realistic sense of youth's ability that matched the challenges they were trying to achieve.

The second strategy, reframing the youth's task, appeared to target the challenge that youth perceived was out of reach. Youth's limited frames made their objectively difficult challenges seem impossible. For Nicolás and Celia, Juanita suggested a frame that helped them see the task of organizing the International Event as re-definable and within their reach. "You have the choice to go a different direction." Other leaders provided expert frames for the challenge that youth, as novices, did not seem to have. Seeing their challenges with this greater understanding of the discipline appeared to make them more manageable – more closely matched to their skill. These new frames seemed to help Nicolás and Celia see their challenges from a different angle, incorporating novel information into how they understood what they were up against and lighting up new pathways forward in creating a community event.

Whether it is restoring confidence in one's ability to tie complicated knots or making competing in an archery tournament less intimidating, leaders seem to be creating a better match of the level of challenge to their level of skill. In Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) theory, by achieving this match, youth can move into an engaged psychological state. This state of flow is characterized by experiences of more sustained engagement.

Implications for Effective Practice Supporting Youth Learning

How might this study's findings help adults understand and respond to the anxious youth they care about? And what are the implications of this study for thinking about how youth learn to get out of a motivation breakdown when they experience self-doubt and immense challenge in complex work? I suggest a key implication for effective practices to support youth's learning can be found in leaders' use of more than one reframing strategy during emotional episodes. Having more reframing strategies, or frames, to offer could help an adult be more effective when responding to anxious youth in the short term and for when youth face future anxiety-inducing challenges.

Leaders, like Tyler, seem to have a toolbox of frames to use when responding to anxious youth. In this study, there were at least three frames leaders used – one dependent on metacognition (thinking about one's sense of ability), another dependent on the interpretation of the situation in the discipline (conceptualization of the task) and one dependent on emotional awareness (understanding emotional experiences). Leaders may use different frames in response to certain situations and other times use frames together. As with Tyler, there may be times when a frame does not work or the youth becomes anxious again about the same challenge situation, necessitating a different framing. Tyler had to be prepared to use different frames through the ups and downs of Allie's complex emotional episode.

Leaders who provide more than one frame could also be helping youth develop their own toolbox of frames. Having only one frame, or one way to reinterpret an emotional episode, may not be as helpful for re-engagement as having multiple frames to draw upon. Research suggests that one type of strategy (such as problem-focused strategies) may not be adequate for all situations requiring emotion regulation (Bonanno & Burton, 2013). A larger repertoire of frames could mean more flexibility and adaptability in response to episodes of anxiety. Youth in these programs often start as novices, but after continued participation, learn how to navigate challenges in their work – including the emotions that come with those challenges. It is possible that as a youth gains expertise through overcoming challenges, they are gaining more frames. By modeling and providing more frames leaders could expedite and amplify youth learning to use multiple frames for the next time they face overwhelming anxiety. Furthermore, research proposes that the social cognitive skill of using another's perspective to guide decision-making increases during adolescence (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). It may be that leaders like Tyler are helping youth tap into and develop this new skill when providing multiple frames. Using reframing strategies in concert may be better for responding to more complex emotional episodes arising from increasingly complex work.

Future Directions

The current study provides insight into how experienced leaders at high-quality youth programs respond to youth who are too anxious to continue with their work. Reframing appears to be a meaningful

way to help youth understand the three facets of their emotional episode in ways that facilitate re-engagement. These findings suggest that experienced leaders, and perhaps other adults, may be able to help youth practice using these three reframing strategies (reframing youth's sense of ability, reframing youth's conceptualization of the task, and reframing youth's emotional experience).

This study also points to additional questions for future inquiry. A potentially fruitful matter to explore is the role of peers in the introduction of new frames. As described in the analysis section, several leaders reported pairing anxious youth with more experienced youth, but data richness was limited. If we consider the significant influence peers have during adolescence, this may be another way for youth to learn new frames for navigating anxiety episodes. At a broader level, researchers should further explore how leader strategies vary by condition and how other factors influence leader judgement when responding to anxious, disengaged youth. It may be that some leaders are more likely to use one strategy versus another. Additionally, while the pre-emptive strategies leaders provided were excluded from this study, exploring such strategies in depth may provide insight into effective program design. While we pursue these questions, it is critical that we also take into account youth's perspectives and experiences regarding the effectiveness of leader strategies.

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